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ABSTRACT

Healthy and successful cities are built out of blocks and neighborhoods. Cities are too large and varied to be regarded or run as uniform entities. Block associations are proposed to be one of the major tools that are available for stabilizing and maintaining urban neighborhoods in a fashion that is both inexpensive and responsive to the needs of local residents. While the organizing of block associations has become quite common, little is understood about one of their principal problems, that is, it has often proved difficult to maintain informal and voluntary organizations for more than a few years. Residents often form groups to solve specific problems, and do not maintain them once the immediate difficulty has been alleviated. Three classes of variables that influence maintenance and effectiveness of block organizations have been identified: (1) the organization's tactics: (2) the resources that are available in the neighborhood: and (3) the organization's structure. (Author/RLV)

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Community Activism and the Maintenance of Urban Neighborhoods.[1]

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Healthy and successful cities are built out of blocks and neighborhoods. Cities are too large and varied to be regarded or run as uniform entities, a fact recognized by urban researchers since the pioneering work of Park and Burgess (1925/1970) and by politicians since the 1960's, when Great Society programs mandated that people who would be affected by . . policies should be given maximum feasible participation in the policy making process. This has led to an emphasis on urban neighborhoods as the unit through which the representation of local interests could be organized (Yates, 1973). Within neighborhoods, stress has been given to voluntary neighborhood associations, which can mobilize community residents to work on community problems and development.

The possibility that community organizations can lessen the anomie of residents of mass society was first noted by Wirth (1938). Since then a number of studies, including ones by the present authors, have documented the positive impact of community organizations improving residential satisfaction and finding solutions to local problems (Hunter, 1974; Miller, Borenstein, Grega, Tsemberis, & Malia, 1978). The basic unit of community organizing in New York City, particularly in middle and upper income neighborhoods, is the block association, a voluntary organization representing the residents of a single block or a small number of contiguous blocks. The city government and a variety of private organizations have promoted block-level organizing during the past dozen years. These efforts have resulted in the formation of approximately 12,000 block organizations, of which between 2,000 and 4,000 are currently active. They have the potential to be a major force for urban development.

Our research over the last several years has tried to understand this phenomenon. This research has looked at the impact of community groups, at characteristics of members, and at how groups are started. At present, we are studying the dynamics of successful organizations, the factors that enable groups to maintain themselves and have an impact on their neighborhoods for extended periods. This paper will discuss some of factors that contribute to successful block organizing and will consider what role community psychologists can take in encouraging and assisting urban community groups.

A variety of resources are available to city residents who want to form a block association. During this summer, the Citizen's Committee for New York has mounted a drive to start 1,000 new organizations. They can provide pamphlets on how to start an organization and consultants who will advise an organization during its first year. While this is very useful, our field experience has convinced us that community groups have a greater need for assistance after their first year. It is relatively easy to found a community group. It is much more difficult to keep one going after the initial

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enthusiasm and excitement have faded. In order to aid this process, community psychologists need models of how block associations succeed or fail. Such models can then be used to design interventions to assist in the organization and maintenance of community groups.

Background

The current psychological literature is of limited assistance. Block associations are a form of social movement organization -- a voluntary association seeking social change. Most of the theory and research on the psychology of social movements (Milgram & Toch, 1969) has taken the individual as its unit of analysis and sought to explain the personality and attitudinal states that motivate individuals to participate in collective behavior. This perspective allows only a limited range of questions to be addressed. It can suggest explanations of who joins movements and what social conditions mobilize them (Smelser, 1962; Gurr, 1970), though empirical tests of these notions have not been very successful (McPhail, 1971; Heirich, 1977). However, it does not allow us to understand how movements function as organizations and why different organizations and movements have differing success in mobilizing people and raising demands. [Organizational psychology discusses such questions, but it tends not to consider voluntary associations (Weick, 1979).]

A useful framework for answering these questions is provided by sociologists. The resource mobilization perspective on social movements (Oberschall, 1973; Gamson, 1975; McCarthy & Zald, 1977) examines the dynamics of movement organizations and the ways in which voluntary associations are part of the organized structure of politics (Tilly, 1978). This perspective can be reconciled with a social psychological perspective on individual attitudes and behavior (Ferree & Miller, 1978). For the present work, taking the organization rather than its members as a unit of analysis provides a vantage from which to analyze the workings and outcomes of block associations.

We are interested in two aspects of organizational outcome. One is the ability of an association to maintain itself -- to continue to function, to mobilize resources and people, and to be able to raise and pursue issues. The second is the association's effectiveness -- the extent to which it can win demands, run successful programs, and positively influence local residents. The effective organization is one that helps its neighborhood. However maintenance and effectiveness do not always go together. While an effective organization must maintain itself, maintenance does not guarantee effectiveness. Some groups maintain themselves on paper or in practice, but have little impact on the neighborhood. It is important to differentiate these outcomes. Groups may fail to maintain themselves, or they may maintain themselves in an ineffectual fashion, or they may maintain themselves as effective groups. We want to understand what causes a block association to reach any of these outcomes.

In our research we have identified three classes of variables that influence maintenance and effectiveness. These are: (1) the organization's tactics -- the sorts of issues the group elects to work on, the methods it chooses to pursue them, and the responses it receives; (2) the resources that are available in the neighborhood -- both the skills and resources of its residents and the problems the neighborhood presents; and (3) the organization's structure -- how it organizes itself and conducts the business of making decisions, recruiting people and mobilizing resources such as money and publicity. In the remaining time we will present an outline of a model of the impact of tactics, resources, and

structure on block association maintenance and effectiveness. This model is offered somewhat tentatively. We regard it as an outline for our further research rather than as a final model.

Method

The data on which the model is based were gathered in the course of interviewing block association activists and others in four New York City neighborhoods, as well as by observing meetings of various block associations. The focus of the data gathering shifted during the course of the research. Initially our interest was concentrated on questions concerning how community groups start and the qualities that identify their members. Later we focussed more on those aspects that distinguish long-lived organizations from others.

Most of the research was conducted in middle income neighborhoods. This focus was chosen because middle income neighborhoods are essential to the stability and financial health of a city. Voluntary block organizing seems to be primarily a middle or upper income phenomenon. One of the most visible signs of urban decay has been the desertion of droves of middle income residents to the suburbs. Among those who stay, voluntary block organizing is a way of solving community problems. In poverty areas organizing is more often initiated by professional organizers and linked to a network of social programs and agencies. Our model applies particularly to indigenous voluntary efforts, and thus is most readily applicable to middle and upper income areas.

A Model of Community Group Organizing

In most instances, a block association is started in response to an immediate problem that local residents are upset about. This can be a particularly violent crime or a rash of suspicious fires. It can also be a change in government services, such as the city cutting back the number of weekly garbage pickups or the state announcing the openning of a halfway house for juvenile offenders. Block associations are usually organized to respond to such immediate threats or problems. Some person or a small group calls a meeting and the organization gets going.

In responding to such immediate problems, block associations assume an active role in "neighborhood foreign relations" (Suttles, 1972), the process of protecting the neighborhood from threats and of negotiating for goods and services with other neighborhoods and with government agencies. Block associations have become a major voice in neighborhood foreign relations in New York, filling the vacuum left by the decline of neighborhood oriented political machines. The city government is usually responsive to community groups that fill this role. Where individuals are likely to be ignored, organizations can make their voices heard. The city will not necessarily accede to all demands, but it is usually willing to talk, to accept information from the group and to offer concessions and compromises concerning the initial issue that the group mobilized around. When this occurs the group may de-mobilize, the challenge to the neighborhood having been met for the time being. Alternatively, the group may maintain itself, following through on the initial demands or broadening the scope of its activities to include other neighborhood matters.

The initial demands that groups organize around are usually reactive in nature (Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly, 1975), they call for a return to the status quo on the behalf of people who believe that their traditional rights or goods are

being infringed. Reactive demands are quite common in periods of social change, they arise from losses that established groups suffer when new interests are recognized by a legitimate system. Such demands can be differentiated from proactive demands which call for the recognition of new interests and rights. Proactive demands are more often raised by groups whose interests have not previously been recognized.

If a group does not de-mobilize after meeting the initial crisis, it must chose between maintaining a program of reactive demands for protecting the neighborhood or broadening its agenda to include proactive demands for the development of the community. Such a shift to proactivity broadens the group's focus from foreign policy to providing a wide variety of services to the community. This is an extremely important transition. Groups that only raise reactive demands are at somewhat of a tactical disadvantage. Because they are reacting, such groups have little control over what issues they fight or the time at which they have to fight them. The issues on which they fight -- crime, cutbacks, expansion of social services -- are ones on which final victories can seldom be reached. Instead, the reactive group has to re-mobilize repeatedly to work on the same problems, for example, reviving the block patrol and block watcher programs every time local crime increases. Residents lose faith in the block association as a problem solving mechanism and become more likely to adopt individual withdrawal than collective fight strategies, in Orbell & Uno's (1975) terms. Thus it appears to be more difficult to re-mobilize residents around the same issue each successive time.

The proactive group can work in a much wider arena. For example, groups get involved in providing free medical services to residents, giving scholarships, buying supplies for schools and parks, organizing programs for the elderly, running sports teams, and many other activities. The careful targetting of such programs allows the group to involve many residents in the association, increasing the likelihood of maintenance. Also, by picking accessible short-range goals, the group can demonstrably increase its effectiveness. Thus a proactive stance has distinct advantages. Yet many groups never adopt one.

It is not yet clear what determines such a transition from a reactive to a proactive stance, but two possibilities deserve mention. First, it is generally easier to get consensus about reactive issues than proactive ones. Few residents disagree about the desirability of stopping crime, but the difficulty in getting people to agree about how to improve a community, particularly in racially or economically heterogeneous areas, can be surprising. The difficulty of developing such consensus can become a real barrier when a group tries to broaden its focus. Secondly, groups that have a more difficult time pressing reactive demands may also find it difficult to broaden to a proactive stance. Their resources may be so drained by fighting reactive battles that there is little left over with which to pursue proactive issues. In addition, the intense defensive struggle may dampen the ardor for community building. The development of reactive and proactive stances needs further study.

A different tactical issue is the militance with which groups press demands. The block association approach to neighborhood problems exemplifies the interest group notion of politics. People with an interest organize in order to make their voices heard and get a share of goods within the established system. This is not a revolutionary tactic, it is a way of getting one's group integrated into the political system. More militant tactics, such as demonstrations or even violence, often express a group's lack of formal integration into the political system. Such tactics are often effective for new and as yet

unrecognized organizations, who find that militance has traditionally been a means of forcing the acceptance of new interests (Alinsky, 1946; Gamson, 1975). More established groups tend to rely on more moderate tactics: phone calls to friendly officials, lobbying, statements at public hearings, letters, and petitions. In general, the more successful groups become more moderate in tone as they lose some of the qualities of a social movement organization and take on more of the characteristics of a recognized interest group.

Tactical problems do not end with developing a proactive stance and having one's interests recognized. There are limits to what block level organizations can do about urban decline. Though such organizations can deter crime, beautify the block, make residents feel better about the neighborhood and get to know their neighbors better, they cannot get at the underlying causes of the urban crisis: the bias in federal tax and transportation policies toward suburban growth; the decreasing number of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs; and the shift of capital toward the Sunbelt. Recognition of such problems led some groups to attempt more expensive development programs to get at their areas' economic problems. Such programs can include attracting new jobs, helping local merchants, or rehabilitating or building new housing. These programs often involve raising substantial funds from federal grants or private organizations. Such projects offer a great opportunity to increase the group's effectiveness but they pose some risks. The funds involved are invariably much greater than the group has handled previously. This often leads to the hiring of professional staff and a general growth in the formal structure of the organization. While this may be necessary, it can undercut the informal and community-based tone that typifies most new block associations. If the group exchanges its spontaneity and responsiveness to local residents for a formal structure, then the group has lost one of its basic elements, even as it gains expensive new programs. The limited funds available for such programs limit the number of groups that are so transformed. Still care must be exercised to see that grants do not lead to the bureaucratization of community groups.

The variety of tactical choices we have discussed are also influenced by the resources provided to block associations by their neighborhoods. Two aspects of the neighborhood have appeared most important in our research. One is the degree of ethnic and economic heterogeneity, the other is the actual level of income. Heterogeneity makes it more difficult to achieve consensus about goals and strategies. It is generally easier to maintain a group in a homogeneous neighborhood, where there are fewer issues on which factional splits can emerge and divide the group. The shortcoming in this is that while maintenance is easier, the lack of diverse skills and the lesser likelihood of finding a network of weak ties (cf. Granovetter, 1973) to other communities, organizations and agencies among the members of a homogeneous group can limit its effectiveness. When a group in a heterogeneous neighborhood manages to avoid factional splits, the diversity of its members can guide it toward broader programs that positively affect more people. If a factional split occurs, the organization may dissolve or it may be maintained by one faction in opposition to other groups in the neighborhood. Such an outcome greatly curtails the impact of the organization on the neighborhood, since some groups of residents will perceive the organization as their enemy. In our experience, such cleavages are most likely to occur on socio-economic status grounds. These grounds are confounded with race because race and income are correlated, but cleavages most often split rich and poor, or fully employed from underemployed, with members of races lining up within economic brackets.

A second important aspect of a neighborhood's resources is its residents' wealth and skills. One of the hallmarks of the healthy block association is that it involves large numbers of residents. Wealth has a complicated effect on this. On the one hand, money facilitates what a community can do -- particularly in programs of purchasing things for the block, such as safety devices or trees. On the other hand, money and the professional skills that have earned it can discourage mass involvement in the block association. A wealthy block can purchase services, such as a paid block guard, instead of providing them through indigenous efforts, for example, with block watchers. A skilled member, such as a lawyer, can often accomplish things working alone in the group's name that another group might attack by putting a petition together. Both tactics may be effective -- for example in forcing landlords to correct housing violations -- but only the latter method gets many people involved. Organizations in wealthy areas are more likely to depend on the efforts of a small number of experts rather than on mass participation. This lack of participation can interfere with group maintenance. When one or two of these active people move elsewhere, or grow tired of the organization, it often ceases to function.

This matter of one or two people running an organization raises the final issue; that of block association structure. Organizations differ in the extent to which they involve all the area's residents -- with the more people involved generally the better -- and the extent to which they operate democratically. A democratic structure encourages the involvement of many residents and increases the likelihood of diverse points of view being represented. This, in turn, can improve effectiveness if the organization can encompass all views. In practice, however, very few organizations follow truly democratic methods. Most block associations are enlightened autocracies that are run by a few leaders whose decisions are generally accepted. Often such leaders are elected, but since they seldom run in contested elections, are actually volunteers.

Leaders give three reasons for the absence of democracy. One is the lack of member interest in day-to-day decision making. The second is that larger organizations require some centralization of power to keep things from becoming chaotic. A third reason, given in heterogeneous neighborhoods, is that an open airing of the cleavages within the group could tear it apart. This last poses a curious problem. Democracy is most likely to function well in a homogeneous neighborhood because there are few cleavages to resolve. But this is where it is needed least. In the areas where serious issues require consideration, the threat that democracy will not work serves as a damper on democratic functioning, and this in turn discourages people from identifying the block association as a means of achieving their ends. The difficulties of making democracy work faces all organizations to some degree. It is particularly difficult to keep a democracy going in the face of serious dissension.

Most block associations elect their leaders, but as mentioned above, this is often actually a process of affirming the positions of whoever volunteered. Contested elections in block associations are more often a sign of divisive factionalism than of healthy democracy. Leaders are an absolutely crucial resource for groups. Regardless of how many people belong to the group, most block associations depend primarily on the efforts and energy of a small number of people. Few people are willing to spend more than a few years devoting most of their spare time and energy to a community group. Leader turnover thus becomes a crucial problem in maintenance (as mentioned above, most seriously in wealthy areas). Most groups do not make adequate provisions for recruiting and training new leaders. It is often difficult for long-standing active leaders

to recognize that others can take their roles. A common reason for decline is the inability to replace key leaders every few years.

Conlcusion

This has been an overly quick sketch of the sources of block associations' success and decline. Space does not allow for full presentation of specific examples, nor is it possible from our current data to specify the statistical probabilities of any of these outcomes within the population of block associations. At present, the model stands as a series of hypotheses based on our research. This fall we will mount a longitudinal interview study of organizations designed to test and extend the model.

The community psychologist, or the social psychologist in his or her community guise, has a dual role. As researchers, community psychologists want to understand the workings of people and organizations. As activists, community psychologists have a role translating research into practical and useful interventions. A model of community group functioning can identify those points at which community groups are likely to founder, and the sorts of issues around which advice and interventions may be particularly helpful. To briefly illustrate, let us point to three major sources of organization decline that can arise after a community group's first year.

1. A stress on reactive demands can cause the group to repeatedly fight losing battles it did not initiate. Groups can be given assistance in assessing community needs and establishing proactive projects that can broaden their scope and impact, and bring the group victories, which also help the group to maintain itself.

2. Diversity leading to factionalism can break a group up. The value of third parties in mediating and reconciling conflicts has long been recognized. Internal struggles are a self defeating matter for most communities. Such factionalism can be more readily mediated by a third party than by people within the group.

3. A failure to train new leaders often leads to a group's demise. Helping to identify the qualities a leader should have, the roles of leaders and the things a leader should be trained to do are important aids to groups whose present leaders sometimes fail to think beyond their own terms in office.

The exact form in which assistance of this nature should be rendered needs to be determined. We do know it must be inexpensive, preferably free. It is also unlikely that we would want professional psychologists taking over or sharing leadership with indigeneous leaders and organizers. Perhaps the best means is through publications and seminars that describe the problems a group is likely to face and the advantages and flaws of various solutions. For the immediate future, however, the development of intervention strategies and the development of a better understanding of block associations through research should proceed in tandem.

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